

Phantom of the FOX

"I've been to Radio City Music Hall. I've been to other big theaters, and nothing can compare with this one. Apparently, I like Moorish architecture," says **Joe Patten**, 80, at home in the living room of his vast, rent-free apartment in the Fox Theatre.



For 26 years, Joe Patten has lived in Atlanta's landmark theater, which he helped save from the wrecking ball

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Joe Patten sees a side of the Fox Theatre no one else sees — even longtime employees — because for the past 26 years, it has been his home.

Whenever he wants to watch a show, he opens a door in his bedroom, walks through a secret passageway and up 30 steps to his private “box” in the balcony — a former spotlight platform almost within touching distance of the Fox’s famous deep blue ceiling with its tiny twinkling-star lights.

“They call me ‘Phantom of the Fox,’ because I know the building so well,” he says. “I’m able to get from one point to another through all sorts of avenues.”

Patten was instrumental in saving the old movie palace from demolition in 1974, forming a nonprofit to buy the property from Southern Bell. Today, at 80, he is as passionate as ever



Patten heads down a private passageway that leads from his bedroom to his own private box. He can watch any Fox performance for free.

about the opulent 1929 theater, a National Historic Landmark, and its magnificent Möller pipe organ.

It was Patten’s love for the pipe organ, in particular, that led to his one-of-a-kind housing arrangement. He lives rent-

free in a stately 3,640-square-foot apartment under the onion domes, with 20-foot ceilings, leaded glass windows and balconies overlooking Ponce de Leon Avenue.

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ONLINE: Check out our photo gallery for more views of “The Phantom” and his quarters. www.ajc.com

Phantom: Guess his favorite show

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A lifelong bachelor, Patten renovated an old office for the Shriners — who initially built the Fox to be their meeting place — into a three-story showplace for his family's antiques, an organ and a player piano.

Patten doesn't play keyboard instruments, but he is a master at restoring them. He was on staff at the Fox from 1974 to 2004, when he retired as technical director. But he has been a fixture there since 1963, when he talked management into letting him recondition the pipe organ for free if they provided the materials.

At the time, Patten was living in a modest home he had built in College Park. He worked as an X-ray technician for Westinghouse but in his free time nurtured his fascination with organs — a love that began when he was a child attending church in Lakeland, Fla.

Whenever the organ repairman was scheduled to work, he would walk to the church to watch him. At 12, Patten was tapped as a substitute repairman.

These days, Patten spends much of his time working on his collector cars, including a rare Gullwing Mercedes and Rolls-Royce Phantom III, stored in a warehouse. He's a night owl and often works on the cars until



BEN GRAY / Staff

Joe Patten's bedroom in the Fox has a door (at right) that leads to his private passageway — and any show he cares to see.

well after the latest show at the Fox has finished — even though he can get free tickets or watch from his box.

Patten's friend Beauchamp Carr, executive vice president of the Woodruff Arts Center, puts it this way: "When you work at a performing arts center, you think differently about what's happening on the stage. It's just what's going on all the time. It's like a MARTA station. There's always a bus or a train coming in, and there's always one going out."

Patten says his apartment walls are 2 to 3 feet thick, so he rarely hears the performances at one of America's busiest theaters.

His all-time favorite show? "The Phantom of the Opera," but not for the

reason you might think. He likes the organ music.

Patten's apartment has its own entrance. His mail is delivered to the Fox offices, and his telephone calls go through the switchboard. It can lead to confusion.

"He was a long-lost relative to us," said Greg Patterson of DeLand, Fla., the son of Patten's half-sister. "We knew he lived in Atlanta. One day, my mother decided to track him down. When she got ahold of the Fox Theatre, she thought she had the wrong number."

Patterson, now 26, became close to his uncle. Over the years, he has stayed at the Fox many times. One of his most vivid memories is of the theater's sophisticated alarm system. "The thing goes off in the middle

of the night, and you snap awake and have to go investigate," he said, laughing.

That alarm — and Patten's presence — saved the Fox from a fast-moving fire in April 1996. The blaze broke out before dawn in wiring in the attic. When firefighters arrived, flames were shooting 50 feet from the roof. The fire did about \$2 million in damage. But it would have been much worse if Patten hadn't been there to call the Fire Department immediately, said Alan Thomas, president of Atlanta Landmarks, the nonprofit that owns the Fox.

Atlanta Landmarks owns the apartment where Patten has the right to live the rest of his life. What happens to the apartment after that?

"We've talked about it, but it has never been resolved," Thomas said. "It just seems morbid to decide anything. We could use it for dressing space, rehearsal halls. It's unlikely that we'd let anyone else live there."

For now, Patten, who sports a big brass belt buckle that says "Fox," seems in good health and has no plans to move.

"I can't think of any other place in Atlanta I'd rather live," Patten said. "There is one other place — the Biltmore House in Asheville. I could handle that, I think. It has a pipe organ in it."